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THE PRESIDENT AND PUBLIC OPINION

BY FABIAN FRANKLIN

Germany's sweep into Russia, the dominion she has not only established but flaunted over that once great empire, Roumania's submission to the Kaiser and acceptance of his unsparing terms, have made the "peace offensive" of a few weeks ago seem almost a distant memory. But in its essence, though doubtless greatly changed in form, the question upon which so many minds were centered by the "long-distance negotiations" between President Wilson on the one hand and Count von Hertling and Count Czernin on the other, may recur in a not distant future. That question is whether, in a situation at all resembling that which existed at the time of those exchanges, the idea of a negotiated peace is one that it is possible to entertain. And upon one particular aspect of that question, and an extremely important one, a closing episode of the recent "peace offensive" period offers matter for serious thought.

On the 1st of March Mr. Hughes made a notable address at the meeting of St. David's Society in New York. His words were a solemn warning against the danger of entertaining any hope that in the then existing relation of military advantage as between Germany and the nations arrayed against her, a peace worth having could be obtained in any other way than by the demonstration of superior power and of inflexible determination to win the war. "There could be", he said, "at this time, it is quite evident, no negotiated peace but a German peace." He did not say that Mr. Wilson thought otherwise. He did not say that the President's address of February 11 in reply to Hertling and Czernin implied that he thought otherwise. He made no criticism whatever of the President. That Mr. Hughes had the address of February 11 in mind is highly probable, nay, almost certain; but whether the warning was designed to have refer-

ence to the actual intent of the President's address or only to the impression which, whether by a true or a false interpretation, was widely put upon it is quite another question. Clearly, if the President did not mean by his address to stimulate the hope of a negotiated peace, Mr. Hughes's speech was not opposition but support; so far from tending to embarrass him, it helped to strengthen his hand by the clearing away of a false and undesired impression. As for motive, it goes without saying that Mr. Hughes was animated solely by devotion to the cause of his country and unstinted loyalty to the head of its Government.

There is no reason to believe that Mr. Wilson himself found anything to object to in Mr. Hughes's speech. But in quarters not remote from the President it appears to have been a stumbling block and a rock of offence. The New York *World* declared that "no matter how amiably" the speech may have been worded, it was "plainly enough in criticism of the President's replies to the Pope, the German Chancellor, and the Austro-Hungarian Foreign Minister," and that Mr. Hughes had misinterpreted these replies. The Washington correspondent of another leading New York paper stated that in Administration quarters the speech was construed "as nothing more than a questioning of the good faith of President Wilson." These observations, though more or less significant as indicating a certain over-sensitiveness in quarters fairly close to the President, do not call for special comment. But in the Washington letter there occur two statements which, taken together, raise a question of vital interest. The first statement is this:

The President will not make peace a moment sooner than American public opinion will want it made.

And the second is this:

Men who talk with the President from time to time come away with the distinct impression that about the most uncompromising person in the world on the subject of a just peace is the Chief Executive of the United States.

Read separately in their context, these two statements may pass, with most readers, as equally satisfactory; brought into juxtaposition, it should be plain to everyone who stops to think that they strike two entirely different notes. Yet there is only too much reason for believing that the confusion of thought which the combination represents is widely entertained.

An incalculable amount of mischief is done by easy-going dissemination of the crude doctrine that the only function of a leader in a democracy is to be the interpreter of the people's will; a doctrine in some sense true enough, but only in a sense infinitely removed from that which would sanction a mere ear-to-the-ground attitude. Even in ordinary times the function of a leader is to look much deeper into the present, and much farther into the future, of public opinion than is possible through a mere count of noses, real or hypothetical; and in time of war that kind of insight and foresight is not only desirable and necessary, it is so indispensable that anything else would mean imbecility and impotence. In time of war the head of the nation must take upon himself the responsibility of deciding not what the people want from moment to moment, or even from year to year, but what, in the light of all that his knowledge, his conscience, and his insight teach him, they will in the long run approve as just and wise.

Now, if Mr. Wilson is "about the most uncompromising person in the world on the subject of a just peace," all is well; if, on the other hand, his state of mind is represented merely by the assurance that he "will not make peace a moment sooner than American public opinion will want it made," all is far from well. Public opinion is subject to strange changes of mood, in actual fact; and as to the outward signs of public opinion, they are so shifting, so various and so liable to being read, even by the most honest of interpreters, in the light of his own inward desire, that to trust to a firm and farseeing policy upon any such basis would be sheer folly. If any one objects to such warnings as Mr. Hughes gave in his speech, he may do so either on the ground that the President is firm as a rock, or on the ground that he will never recede from his position until he is convinced that public opinion demands it; but it is impossible to object on *both* these grounds, for they are incompatible with each other. You cannot at the same time say that President Wilson will be guided by public opinion and that it is reprehensible to intimate any doubt that he will stick inflexibly to his purpose. And not only is the objector bound to choose one horn or the other of this dilemma, but he is wrong whichever horn he chooses. For if the President is subject to the guidance of public opinion, those who are intensely opposed to a certain possible change are called upon to make this known, as their contribution to the expression of public opinion; while if he

is determined to stick uncompromisingly to his position, no better service can be rendered to him than to show that any deviation from it would be regarded by patriotic citizens as a calamity.

As a matter of fact, however, the only endurable supposition is that Mr. Wilson will hold to the course he laid out for himself and for the nation in his memorable war-speech of April 2, 1917, and in his address of December 4, 1917, at the opening of the present session of Congress. Nothing short of an overwhelming demonstration of national sentiment against that course could possibly justify any variation or shadow of turning in the prosecution of the supreme purpose declared in those utterances; and there is about as much probability of such a demonstration as there is of the Capitol being swallowed up by an earthquake. The nation's response to the President's call was instantaneous and enthusiastic; and thus far every month has but served to emphasize the staunchness of its loyalty. Thus pledged to a mighty effort, to the accomplishment of the great task necessary to our safety and the safety of the world, we must stand to the work at any sacrifice. To do otherwise would mean dishonor and disgrace, as well as the destruction of all that we prize as a nation of freemen, all that our country's history has stood for. And no shifting of the blame upon a wavering of public opinion could serve to lift the guilt of it from those upon whom the responsibility of action falls, and above all from the one man with whom alone the decision rests.

Probably no one knows this better than President Wilson himself, and it is to be hoped that all the men of any real weight in his entourage know it too. And there is another thing which they must know likewise, but which they may at some time be tempted to forget or ignore. Not only is it the President's duty to be superior to the fluctuations of public opinion which may be encountered in the course of the war, but it is in his power almost completely to control them, one may almost say to prevent them. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that in this tremendous trial of the nation he can make public opinion what he chooses. This is due partly to the traditional respect of Americans for the Presidential office, partly to the extraordinary hold which he himself has established upon the public confidence, and partly to a third factor. The very magnitude of the issues, the enormous range and complexity of the problems involved, the novelty

in American affairs of any such consideration of international difficulties—all this powerfully reinforces the nation's instinctive desire to stand unquestioningly behind the President in time of foreign war. No man but Mr. Wilson himself can shake the people's determination to carry out the programme which Mr. Wilson laid out, to fulfil the pledge which in their name he has solemnly made and solemnly reiterated. Unless he gives the signal to relax, there will be no relaxing of purpose; there will even be an intensification of purpose whenever he gives the signal for that. Never has there been a time when the impulse that the President may receive from public opinion was in such large measure a reflection of the impulse which public opinion receives from him.

In this one respect President Wilson's task is distinctly easier than was Lincoln's in the Civil War. Upon the issues of that war there was serious division of opinion in the North, resting upon long-standing party divisions bound up with the whole history of the Republic. There was constant danger of these divisions manifesting themselves in such shape as to threaten the integrity of the nation's policy. Such opposition, whether open or covert, as exists now to the nation's war policy belongs to a wholly different category. In part it is plainly stamped as of alien origin, in part it represents the attitude of individuals professing doctrines that are of recent date and which have no standing in what may be called the collective consciousness of the people. Against the clear call of militant patriotism the sound of these voices will never be able to make head. Its only opportunity for serious mischief lies in the possibility of a conjuncture of which as yet there is no sign, but against which our minds must be fore-armed. When death and destruction have been brought home to us as they so long have been to the nations of Europe, when the outlook is dark and doubtful, when we shall be suffering real privation at home and grieving for the loss of our best and dearest abroad, then any lowering of that note of militant patriotism will be an invitation to the malcontents to put forth all their latent strength and to gather into their ranks all who are weak of heart or infirm of purpose. But, stupendous as Mr. Wilson's task is in other respects, he has at least this advantage, as compared with Lincoln, that even in that contingency his appeal will be to an essentially undivided nation, not to a people among whom

traditional party divisions gave a certain respectability to the proposals of sedition or disloyalty.

How formidable these proposals became in the closing year of the Civil War, we shall do well to recall and lay to heart now. Everybody knows that the Democratic national platform of 1864 declared that the war was a failure; what is not so well remembered is the degree in which the infection of discouragement and discontent had spread outside the limits of the Democratic party. It was not a Democrat, but Horace Greeley, who wrote to Lincoln on August 9, 1864, almost frantically urging him to stop the war. Let us recall precisely what he said:

I know that nine-tenths of the whole American people, North and South, are anxious for peace—peace on almost any terms—and utterly sick of human slaughter and devastation . . . I beg you, implore you, to inaugurate or invite proposals for peace forthwith. And in case peace can not now be made, consent to an *armistice for one year*, each party to retain, unmolested, all it now holds, but the rebel ports to be opened.

This may serve to give some idea of the back-fire with which Lincoln had to contend. But he held firmly on his way. And who shall measure what his country, what the cause of liberty and democracy the world over, owes to his constancy? Long before that proposed year of armistice would have expired, the Confederacy had become a thing of the past. The fall of Richmond, the surrender at Appomattox, the saving of the Union for all time, had been accomplished within eight months of the penning of Greeley's letter. And in the interval there had been fought not only great battles, but the political campaign which Lincoln himself at one stage deeply feared would result in victory for the party which had declared the war a failure.

Against just this kind of difficulty, thank Heaven, President Wilson will not be called upon to contend. But on the other hand the real outlook—the actual difficulties before us, the undeniable grounds for discouragement, as distinguished from the mere promptings of a panicky imagination—may offer a far darker prospect than any that presented itself to the North during the Civil War. The desire to yield because of partisan half-heartedness or dissent is so nearly non-existent that it need not be reckoned with; but the temptation to yield in the face of staggering difficulties may become so great as to require leadership as high and as firm as Lincoln's

to resist. And in order to brace the nation to resist it when it comes, it is essential that the tone of public opinion be steadily sustained at every stage of the struggle. It is an intense realization of this that prompts such warnings as that of Mr. Hughes. Those who feel impelled to make them cannot trouble to inquire too closely what bearing they may have upon the President's state of mind. To gauge that state of mind exactly is beyond the possibility of any but himself; and the matter is one upon which we cannot afford to take chances. Mr. Wilson may know as well as anyone can tell him—he probably does know as well as anyone can tell him—how potent every word he utters may be for good or ill. Vast as are his powers as executive head of the nation, his influence in determining the nation's temper is a factor no less momentous in the shaping of events. And if there be but a shade of doubt as to whether an utterance of his may tend toward relaxing instead of strengthening the people's concentration on the one purpose of carrying the war to victory, then those who know the dangers that may be ahead must speak out and do what in them lies to remove that shade of doubt.

No American can contemplate the burden of responsibility resting upon President Wilson without a sense of its awful, its appalling, weight. It may be doubted whether any human being in all history has been called upon to exercise power so vast and comprehensive, and to make decisions so many-sided and so momentous. No higher tribute can be paid to a man than that which his countrymen are paying to Mr. Wilson when they repose in him a trust commensurate with that power and that responsibility. The consciousness that they do so must be to him not only a source of pride and satisfaction, but an invaluable reservoir of strength. We have gone through a twelvemonth of startling departures from our accustomed ways, of commitments to giant undertakings undreamed of a year ago, of readjustments affecting almost every phase of our economic organization. All this has been done essentially under the guidance of the President, and it has been accepted with a readiness, an absence of serious dissent or disturbance, that is little short of marvelous. But there is a limit beyond which confidence in the President cannot go without becoming an unmanly subserviency, desirable neither from the standpoint of the people nor from his own. The doctrine that the king can

do no wrong was not, even in its palmiest days, understood to cover the acts of the king's ministers. The President of the United States must be—and Mr. Wilson most emphatically is—his own prime minister; to refrain from warning him or the country that he may have made a mistake, or that he may be in danger of making a mistake, on the ground that this implies a want of confidence in him, would be to wrap ourselves in an atmosphere of more than Oriental servility. It would be the worst service we could do him personally, as well as the nation. His great messages of April 2, 1917, and of December 4, 1917, stand unwithdrawn, nor is there any reason to believe that he contemplates any withdrawal from the position upon which he then planted himself and the nation. But dark days are before us—darker days, and more of them, than any of us a few months ago expected to have to confront. Day by day, this will become more fully realized by the nation; and it would be playing the part of the ostrich to shut out from our consciousness the danger at home that will surely arise from the increase of danger abroad. We shall have disloyal Vollandighams lifting up the voices they now dare not raise, and loyal Greeleys yielding to the counsel of panic fear; and it will rest with Wilson, as it rested with Lincoln, to hold fast his purpose in the face of clamor and temptation. He will stand firm; he will not mistake the voice of a hysterical minority, or even a passing mood of the nation, for the deliberate mandate of the American people. But it is for us, so far as in us lies, to strengthen him to hold the rudder true, as it will be for future generations of Americans to acclaim the imperishable greatness of his service.

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